

Correspondence

Letters for publication in the Correspondence columns should be addressed to:

The Editor, British Journal of Psychiatry, Chandos House, 2 Queen Anne Street, London, W1M 9LE.

POLITICAL DISSENTERS IN MENTAL HOSPITALS

DEAR SIR,

In 1971 Dr. Richter (1) drew attention in your correspondence columns to reports of suspected abuses of psychiatry in the USSR. There is reason to think that such abuses have continued. For example, in August this year Academician Andrei Sakharov is reported to have said in a letter to the Russian Health Minister, Dr. Petrovsky, that two political dissidents, Viktor Fainberg and Vladimir Borisov, 'are dying in a Leningrad psychiatric prison hospital' (2). More detailed documentation is to be found in the booklet by Cornelia Mee (3), in the book by Reddaway (4), and in the report available from Mrs. E. Aitken (5). *The Times* has published a protest, based on the latter material, by Professor Jenner and other psychiatrists (6), and a protest about Fainberg and Borisov by a number of distinguished churchmen and others (7).

I wish to present information on three more instances in which I believe there has been an abuse of psychiatric procedures in the Soviet Union. The information became known to me in connection with work for Soviet Jews, and is based upon the telephone calls of myself and others speaking to Jews in Moscow. Part of this information has been reported by correspondents of newspapers in the United Kingdom. The cases are as follows:

1. *Yuli Brind*

Yuli Brind, a metal engraver in Kharkov, aged 42, submitted documents to the emigration authorities on 13 January 1972. On 1 February his home was searched, and during the two weeks that followed he was called to KGB headquarters. On 24 March he was again summoned by the KGB and forcibly taken to Mental Hospital No. 36 in Kharkov. Brind had no known previous psychiatric history. On 3 April he staged a hunger strike. On 5 April he sent a telegram to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and to the United Nations Human Rights Commission appealing for help. Telephone calls were made on his behalf to Dr. Radziszhevsky, the senior psychiatrist at the hospital, who said that Brind would appear within one week before a commission of professors and doctors to determine whether or not he was mentally ill (8). The caller, not myself, asked if he might phone

after that, to which the answer was 'All right'. At the appropriate time repeated telephone enquiries failed to reach Dr. Radziszhevsky on six successive days. On the seventh day the answer was given: 'He is travelling'. Later in April, after about four weeks in the mental hospital Mr. Brind was removed to a prison, and his mother was told by the Kharkov KGB that he was moved because he was found not to be mentally ill. He was charged under paragraph 187 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code with anti-Soviet slander. This charge appears to be based on the fact that in searching his flat the KGB found a tape-recording of a broadcast on Israel Overseas Radio in Russian. He has since been sentenced to 2½ years in prison. I infer from this sequence of events that Brind might have remained in hospital indefinitely but for the outside interest taken.

2. *Victor Yakhot*

Victor Yakhot is a physicist who sought permission to leave for Israel. He is a pupil and friend of Professor Levich, a member of the Academy of Science of the USSR who has also asked to leave Russia. Yakhot was served with documents requiring him to register for military service. This he refused to do on the grounds that he had renounced his Soviet citizenship as required for his request for emigration. On Friday 28 April Yakhot was visited by two militiamen and taken forcibly to a military office. There he was given a medical examination and interviewed by two doctors, one of whom was called Sinorova. She dwelt on the reasons behind his intended emigration and concluded that he really should attend a psychiatric clinic. He refused and was thereupon relieved of his internal passport. The next day, Saturday, a car with Red Cross markings pulled up outside his house and the occupants began to search for him. Yakhot was not in and has since protested against this search by addressing a letter to the World Psychiatric Association and the International Red Cross. I spoke to Yakhot myself about this time by telephone and was impressed by the appropriateness of his replies. There was not a hint of illness requiring treatment nor has he had such illness previously.

Psychiatric pressure on Yakhot has been dropped, but he was subjected to military pressure and was arrested temporarily. Academician V. G. Levich subsequently employed him as his private secretary for some weeks until Mr. Yakhot received permission to emigrate to Israel.

3. *Alexei Tumerman*

Alexei Tumerman is approximately 30 years old. His childhood was deprived because both his parents were

imprisoned under Stalin. He completed one year of history studies at university, which he then left. He was depressed at the time and sought advice from Professor Snezhnevsky who treated him with insulin, which he found unhelpful. He then had psychotherapy from another doctor over a period of two or three years and found this useful. From that time Mr. Tumerman has never himself felt any need for psychiatric help. He has, however, been taken into the Soloviov Mental Hospital in Moscow, against his wishes and without the concurrence of his family, on four occasions. The first of these was about five years ago when he had become interested in the dissident movement. A policeman called at his flat and invited him to visit the police station, and from there he was sent to a mental hospital for several weeks. The second admission followed a demonstration in front of the Supreme Soviet. The third admission in May 1972, and the fourth in September 1972 did not follow demonstrations, but coincided with a number of arrests of Jews and others in Moscow.

On none of these last four occasions did either Mr. T. himself or his relatives and friends consider that he was in any way ill. During his last forced admission, Dr. G. A. Low-Beer spoke to the chief doctor of the hospital, who said 'The diagnosis is schizophrenia, and this is his 20th time with us here'. The hospital was visited by friends who were not allowed to see him, but he called to them from a locked ward that he was well and would not accept any treatment. He was released on the application of his parents (who were initially out of Moscow). On the day after his release he rang Dr. Low-Beer to thank him for his efforts; in that conversation he was wholly clear and precise in his remarks and views, and nothing that he said could be interpreted as delusional.

It is worth noting that Mr. Tumerman occupies a rather special position. He has been active in the general democratic movement led by Academician Sakharov and is a friend of Vladimir Bukovsky. He has also been associated with the Jewish movement to emigrate to Israel. Because of this he is well known to both groups, and both report that he is 'a marvellous man', with an impressive personality and no evidence at all of insanity.

In none of these cases was there evidence that compulsory psychiatric enquiry or observation was necessary. It is the belief of those whom I know, and who were concerned with the above events, that public interest outside the Soviet Union in the abuses which occur there is helpful in stopping those abuses. If this view is correct, psychiatrists in the West have a responsibility to take a continuing interest in Soviet psychiatric practices. Indeed this is the least that should be done in the light of the call by the World Federation for Mental Health for member associations throughout the world promptly to investigate all allegations of the political misuse of psychiatric diagnoses (9). Any such investigation by psychiatrists at the present time ought to focus particularly on the very dubious practice of diagnosing

schizophrenia on alleged psychopathic features (10) or reformist ideas (11).

H. MERSKEY.

*The National Hospitals for Nervous Diseases,
Queen Square,
London, W.C.1.*

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SUICIDE PREVENTION: A MYTH OR A MANDATE?

DEAR SIR,

Suicide prevention centres are mushrooming in the U.S.A. How well do they work? Of all the countries in the Western World, Great Britain is the only one that has significantly reduced its suicide rate in the last decade. In 1953 Chad Varah founded, in Great Britain, The Samaritans. This organization steadily enlarged and now offers an extensive emergency telephone and counselling service to British citizens who are thinking of killing themselves. The Samaritans is a noble organization. On both sides of the Atlantic it is often given as an example that suicide prevention works. But does it?

Over the last decade Great Britain's Gas Board have been reducing the lethal carbon monoxide content of its domestic gas. The graph below shows the Gas Council's estimated annual average content of carbon monoxide in the domestic gas supplied to England, Wales and Scotland (1). The graph also shows the total number of suicides in England and Wales for the years since 1945 and the number of deaths for the common methods used (2).

The number of suicide deaths for methods other than domestic gas poisoning and poisonous substances has remained fairly constant. Suicide by poisonous substances, the vast majority of which are now pills